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"The College Woman and the New Epoch"

BY

PRESIDENT MARY E. WOOLLEY

Mount Holyoke College

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*The College Woman and the New Epoch**

By PRESIDENT MARY E. WOOLLEY

Mount Holyoke College

MY SUBJECT for this evening was chosen and partly thought out before I received a copy of the interesting address on "The Southern Woman: Past and Present," given by Professor Mims at your last commencement. If it had not been, I might have brought you something besides a woman to think about again this evening. Yet, I am not sure. Realizing the opportunities opening before women, nay rather, the insistent demand which is forcing itself upon them, seeing, perhaps, even more clearly than young women can see for themselves, the possibilities of greater development than has already come, it would have been difficult for me to resist the temptation to bring "the woman" once more on to your platform.

This time she is the College Woman, of whom I hope you have not wearied, although you know her so well. She has not been long on the stage. We are liable to ignore that, and take her for granted, quite as if she had always existed, forgetting that the entire movement for the higher education of women is compassed within one hundred years. A century ago the educational world had not risen to the conception of Matthew Vassar, the conception which led to the founding of Vassar College, that "woman, having received from her Creator the same intellectual constitution as man, has the same right as man to intellectual culture and development." In fact, until the latter part of the eighteenth century, the common schools of Massachusetts very seldom admitted girls, and then only two or three hours in a day after the boys were dismissed or during the summer months when there were not enough boys to fill them, occasionally the hours being

*An address delivered before the faculty, students and friends of Randolph-Macon Woman's College on Founders' Day, which was celebrated on March 13th, as March 12th, the birthday of Dr. W. W. Smith, fell this year on Sunday.

from five to seven o'clock in the morning. It says much for the intellectual zest of our great-great-grandmothers that in New London, Connecticut, twenty young ladies were enrolled in this five o'clock a. m. school. That the town fathers occasionally suffered compunctions of conscience, is evident from some of the town records, notably those of Gloucester, Massachusetts, 1790, which direct the master to "begin his school from the first day of April to the last day of September at eight o'clock in the morning and close at six o'clock in the afternoon, or any eight hours in the twenty-four as shall be thought the most convenient, but that two hours, or a proportionable part of that time, be devoted to the instruction of females—as they are a tender and interesting branch of the Community, but have been much neglected in the Public Schools of this town."

It is not my thought this evening to trace the development of this interest in the education of the "tender and interesting branch of the Community," its expansion from a willingness in the late eighteenth century, to give a fraction of time in the common schools, to the opening in the early nineteenth century of academies like Monson and Derry and Bradford, admitting girls as well as their brothers, and sending into the man's college the sturdy, well-prepared boys, to become leaders among the men of the century; or its further development into the conviction that for girls as well as for boys, there must be a chance for something more than the common school and the academy, the conviction which led men like William Woodbridge and Joseph Emerson to throw their influence on the side of "improvement in female education," and women like Catherine Beecher, Emma Willard and Mary Lyon, to give their lives to realize the ideal of the same educational opportunities for girls that were given to their brothers. Nor was this movement, appreciable about 1820, still more marked between 1830 and 1840, confined to the North. The Wesleyan Female College at Macon, Georgia, was probably the first authorized to grant degrees and many institutions were founded in the South, a development cut short by the Civil War. To understand what has been accomplished in these

latter years, one has only to look at a college like this one, whose Founders' Day we are celebrating.

It is good to turn backward with our wreaths of laurel, our palm branches, for the men and the women who wrought that we might enjoy the fruit of their labors—it is better to go forward in their spirit to even larger things. The college woman has ceased to be a novelty, she is accepted more or less seriously in all sections of the country, in all phases of our life. But today there is a new significance in being a college woman. “When the sun went down on July 31, 1914, it went down on a world on which it was destined never to rise again,” said Nicholas Murray Butler.

There is no one so rash as to attempt to predict what “tomorrow” will bring, but no one is so lacking in vision as not to realize that it will bring new demands, heavier responsibilities, than ever before.

I often think, as I look over the head lines of the morning paper, of those other morning papers, only two or three years ago, when it frequently happened that very ordinary events were magnified to sufficient proportions to make an appearance on the front page. Now what a relief to overstrained nerves and overwrought sympathies it would be to see inconsequential details in place of the daily record of the world tragedy.

And as a corollary to that world tragedy, we hear much of “Preparedness.” “What the country needs most of all is Preparedness.” Preparedness—for what? For living? For a higher and more enduring civilization? These are questions which a stranger from—let us say Mars—might ask, if visiting for the first time this “great round world” of ours, of which he had heard, which he knew had been in process of physical preparation for aeons, and for hundreds and even thousands of years had been inhabited by human beings, presumably engaged in learning the art of living. “What we need most of all is Preparedness.” It would be natural for him to assent and the more impressed he was with our civilization, the more hearty would be that assent. “Of course, preparedness on an ever-increasing

scale, that humanity may reach greater heights than it has yet attained."

But this perfectly natural interpretation of our distant cousin from Mars is not the meaning which is usual today. As Mr. Anson Phelps Stokes says in an illuminating article on "The Question of Preparedness," in the January number of "The Yale Review": "In preparedness there is only good; in Preparedness both good and bad. The difference may be compared to that between the word conservation written with a small *c* and a large *C*, or prohibition written with a small *p* and a large *P*. In each of these three cases a generic word of long history has suddenly been seized upon by a group of men to advance some specific ideal of national scope, which they have exalted to a position of dominant importance and at the same time restricted in meaning within narrow limits."

The thought of preparedness which I bring to you this evening is of preparedness with the small *p*, the interpretation which our cousin from Mars would give if he heard the word, preparedness in the large sense, to meet the challenge of the world's new epoch. The challenge will come, already comes, from every side of our modern life, from the home and the school, the workshop and the study, the city ward and the church, home and education, industry and profession, politics and religion, we cannot escape it, wherever we go, whatever our work. And it will be a world challenge, as never before. Our imaginations are mereifully incapable of grasping the full significance of what has been called "the collapse of Europe, the breakdown of civilization." "When I think of those soldiers in trenches, exposed to all manner of discomfort and hardship and disease as well as danger and of the other armies of the homeless, made up of helpless women and children and decrepit old people—I feel as if I could not knit fast enough!" said a friend last year as her needles flew. The time is coming when every man and woman with a spark of interest in humanity and in the progress of the world will feel that he or she cannot knit fast enough, to knit up again this intricate web that we call civilization. And a double responsibility will rest upon the men and women who

have had the advantages of education, in other words, upon the strong.

The strength to meet the new epoch has a physical side. You may remember that Emerson says in his essay on *Power*: "For performance of great mark, it needs extraordinary health. If Eric is in robust health, and has slept well, and is at the top of his condition, and thirty years old, at his departure from Greenland he will steer west, and his ships will reach Newfoundland. But take out Eric and put in a stronger and bolder man—Biorn or Thorfin—and the ships will, with just as much ease, sail six hundred, one thousand, fifteen hundred miles further and reach Labrador and New England. There is no chance in results. With adults, as with children, one class enters cordially into the game and whirls with the whirling world; the others have cold hands and remain bystanders; or are only dragged in by the humor and vivacity of those who can carry a dead weight. The first wealth is health. Sickness is poor-spirited, and cannot serve any one; it must husband its resources to live. But health or fullness answers its own ends and has to spare, runs over and inundates the neighborhoods and creeks of other men's necessities."

How can one hope to meet the demands of tomorrow without the "first wealth" of which Emerson speaks? It is true that some fine tasks have been performed for the world by those who were physically handicapped, but that does not invalidate the statement that physical unfitness is a handicap. Many a man—and woman—of earnest purpose and marked ability have seen their ambitions and aims in life come to nothing because the body failed at the critical moment, or because there was no physical reserve to carry through that which was so well planned.

The strength needed to meet the new epoch is not alone or even chiefly physical. We hear a great deal today, and rightly, about preparation for efficient service, but preparation for service does not consist simply in the ability to be a good workman, to understand one's "job," whatever that may be. That is eminently to be desired; all along the line the need is for workers who know how to do and find the joy in work which comes

naturally from achievement, thus both giving more to their work and gaining more from it. But since the world began, there has never been a time when progress was not dependent primarily upon the mind directing the work, upon the thinker behind the thing accomplished. To the outsider it may seem like bringing coals to Newcastle to talk at a college to college women about the importance of developing the power to think, but those of us who have been longest in college work realize that it is the very place which needs that emphasis. Not that we think less in college than anywhere else—I cannot believe that, although we are sometimes told that it is true. If I did, I should follow the advice of a certain man—a Southerner he happened to be—who, having heard that I had made one of those apocryphal remarks which one never does make, that a working girl was a better home-maker than a college woman, wrote that he quite agreed with me in not believing in education for women, that his wife was not educated and he intended that his daughter should not be, but if those were my sentiments, why didn't I give up my job? It is because of faith, not because of lack of faith in the college woman, in her possibilities and in the possibilities of the college for her, that I urge this new stress upon the *deepening* and the *heightening*, if I may so express it, of her mental powers. The normal college woman today hardly needs new emphasis upon intellectual breadth. We are broad beyond anything that our grandmothers dared to imagine! But we have not begun to plumb the depths or scale the heights intellectually, which women may achieve. We are not always taught that. A favorite subject of addresses and articles, so favorite that it has been worn almost threadbare, is that the feminine mind may, can, must, should spread over the surface of things, be broad, but that if it attempts to dig or aspires to soar, it is doomed to disappointment and failure.

It may be that the new epoch, on whose threshold we are standing, will change that valuation, at least it will add new emphasis to the need of change. Who can tell what a day will bring forth in this crisis of the world's history? A crisis, because it is deciding whether law or war shall govern the world, whether

might is right or right is might, not alone in the political relations but also in the commercial and industrial and social relations of humanity. And in this crisis to whom shall humanity turn for leadership? To "the picked half million," was David Starr Jordan's answer in a recent lecture at the University of Pennsylvania, quoting from William Stead's phrase to the college men of Great Britain. "It is theirs to command while the world must obey." "They are the men who must think for themselves," continues Doctor Jordan, "and the man who can think should be the man who can act. To this potent group the men before me belong. You are among the chosen million of America, and to you I wish to say a word as to the world catastrophe in which you, with the rest of the civilized world, are now involved."

"It is your right and your duty to see things as they really are, with the eye of a scholar rather than of the partisan. It is your privilege and your duty to help others to see them so. The scholar should know the things that abide in human affairs and to distinguish them from those that are temporary and illusory."

"Never in the history of the world was the need of wise leadership greater than now, never were the stakes so great, never was blind action more futile. Effort misdirected may do harm at times, but very little good. 'Small efforts,' said John Stuart Mill, 'do not produce great effects; they produce no effects at all.' Hence the need for strong effort, for clear-headed, uncompromising wisdom, and the possession of such wisdom is the birthright of the educated man."

Never in the history of the world was the need of wise leadership greater than now—hence the need for strong efforts, and for clear-headed, uncompromising wisdom, and the possession of such wisdom is the birthright also of the educated woman. The women who can think, in what relations of life are they not needed? The world is impoverishing itself as never before in its history. We hardly need the reminder that "the picked half million in many nations are dying in the trenches today." Scholars, historians, scientists, discoverers, investigators, inventors, the patient, laborious seekers after truth, those who possess the genius of hard work, the young men who would have enriched

the world of tomorrow, the old men who were enriching the world of today, laying down their lives by the thousands, a tragic outlook for civilization save as the New World takes up the work which the Old World is madly unfitting itself to carry. When the call comes to the youth of America—"It is for you to take the places these men should have filled, to stand in the ranks of constructive workers for civilization," the "you" means young women as well as young men. It includes our college youth who have the opportunity to dig for intellectual treasures never found on the surface, to be had simply for the asking, the treasures of research, of investigation, of scientific inquiry, which shall add a contribution to the learning of the world. There is no reason why the ranks of scholarship should not include more women, why historical and scientific investigation should not present a field for which in many respects, they are peculiarly well fitted. Filling the mind with large interests, applying native talent for painstaking industry to some investigation that will make the world richer, cultivating the powers of application and concentration, developing the habit of thinking *through*, not only about the edges of a subject, this is the power which the world has a right to demand of the college woman as well as of the college man.

Nor is the need of this power limited to the world of scholarship. "To think clearly is to act rightly," says Doctor Jordan. Again the appeal comes to us, women, as well as to men, to do our part "in thought and action in this the greatest crisis of the civilized world." What is our relation to the great problems confronting us? Are the "scholars in the making," as they have been defined, using every opportunity to develop the power of clear and profound thought, by rigid discipline and unremitting application, that they may be ready to do their part in the solving of problems, in the disentangling of the entanglements of life? How can we be content to live on the surfaces, when beneath the surface there is so much that demands the best that is within us?

The new epoch calls for a *deeper* living; it also calls for a *higher* living. "Dare to be an idealist," is its challenge. "Be yourself, but be your best self." We are so afraid of not being

practical, in this age, so afraid that we shall be called visionary, forgetting that "where there is no vision, the people perish." "Where there is no vision"—with what awful accuracy the prophet delineated life, not the life of centuries ago only, but of our own day and generation! Dare to be a visionary, a seer of visions, for your own life, for the life of the community in which you live, for the life of the nation of which you are a part, for the life of the world. We cannot shut the world out tonight, if we would. "As you listen to my voice," said Dr. Charles E. Jefferson to an audience of students in the Middle West, "you hear the groans of men and the sobs of women across the sea." And even in the midst of these tragic days, we are to keep the vision.

"I do not believe, for an instant, that war has falsified our vision of peace," writes Arthur Christopher Benson, in "Escape and Other Essays." "We must cling to it more than ever, we must emphasize it, we must dwell in it. I regard war as I regard an outbreak of pestilence; the best way to resist it is not to brood over it, but to practice joy and health. The plagues which devastated Europe have not been overcome by philosophy, but by the upspringing desire of men to live cleaner and more wholesome lives. To brood over the war, to spend our time in disentangling its intricate causes, seems to be a task of future historians. But a lover of peace, confronted by the hideousness of war, does best to try, if he can, to make plain what he means by peace and why he desires it. I do not mean by peace an indolent life, lost in gentle reveries. I mean hard daily work, and mutual understanding, and lavish help, and the effort to reassure and console and uplift. And I mean, too, a real conflict—not a conflict where we set the best and bravest of each nation to spill each other's blood—but a conflict against crime and disease and selfishness, and greediness and cruelties. There is much fighting to be done. Can we not combine to fight our common foes, instead of weakening each other against evil?"

"Who can set a limit to the influence of a human being?" once wrote our New England seer. It is well for us to recall his words in these days when our individual lives seem so small, so weak, so impotent. Who *can* set a limit to influence, to the in-

fluence of a life that is thoughtful and earnest and idealistic, a life that finds its circumference not in the contracted circle of its own selfish interests but in the welfare of humanity, whose centre is not self, but the Master. For the college woman as she faces this new and momentous epoch there can be no message more full of meaning than the message of our great New England Bishop to the men of the nineteenth century, transposed for the women of the twentieth: "Oh, do not pray for easy lives. Pray to be stronger women! Do not pray for tasks equal to your powers. Pray for powers equal to your tasks! Then the doing of your work shall be no miracle. But you shall be a miracle. Every day you shall wonder at yourself, at the richness of life, which has come in you by the grace of God."



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